

[Thomas Cox]

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THOMAS COX. [CC?]

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A Pioneer of 1847 - Merchant, Manufacturer / and Farmer.

Author: Joseph Henry Brown, grandson of Thomas Cox first merchant of Salem. Joseph Henry crossed the plains to Oregon with Thomas Cox in 1847 when a boy of nine years.

The Pioneers- "They travel the prairie as of old, Their fathers sailed the sea, And made the West, "as they had the East The homestead of the Free."

THOMAS COX was born in the State of Virginia, October 22, 1790. His early life was spent upon a farm, and when in his teens, his father and family moved to Ross county, Ohio, where he attended school during the winter when he could be spared from farm

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work, in the then sparsely settled country. During summer he worked on the farm until he became of age, when he married Miss Martha Cox, with whom he lived for thirty-eight years, as she died in Oregon in 1849. Although of the same family name they were not relatives.

Mr. C. resided in that State four years after his marriage. The outfit to commence married life in those days was not very elaborate, as it consisted of a small iron bake oven, three tin plates and cups, some iron spoons, a pair of flax hackles, which fastened to his saddle, and with his young wife mounted behind on the only mare they had, started for his place in the timber to make a farm. He raised flax, broke and retted it and his wife made all of their wearing apparel. Corn bread, wild game for meat and wild honey was the staple article of food, with corn hominy in the winter, and they were happy and healthy - the two greatest boons on earth - but the natural inclination was to "Go West" and seek new homes and better their condition.

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In 1825 he sold his farm and moved with his family of three children to Indiana and settled on Flatrock river, Bartholemew county, where he built a grist and carding mill, the first in that country. Being naturally an ingenious mechanic, he built this establishment almost wholly himself. He remained at that place a few years, then selling out to good advantage, moved to the Wabash river country, in the same state, and erected a fine grist mill and carding factory at the mouth of the Shawnee river. During the winter of 1833 he sold out his property at an enhanced value, narrowly escaping being broken up as the new owner had the misfortune to have the entire mills swept away by ice and flood within a fortnight after receiving the same.

While he resided in Indiana he manufactured guns, gunpowder and done general blacksmithing. The two former occupations were essential to the citizens of the surrounding country in protecting themselves and herds from the Indians and wild beasts.

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During the spring of 1834 he moved with his family and settled on the Kankakee river, Will county, Illinois, and laid out a town which he named Winchester, but afterwards changed to Wilmington. Wilmington is now a thriving little city of several thousand inhabitants, through which several railroads lead and the river is spanned by a splendid iron bridge. Shortly after his settlement and laying out of the town he commenced the erection of saw, grist and carding mills, which proved of great benefit to the surrounding country and financially successful to the projector. He also established a store, thus increasing his business very much. During the early years of his settlement in Illinois there was great excitement in regard to land speculation and the establishing of banks, issuing great amount of paper money, of which a large amount was worthless and known 3 afterwards as "wildcat banks:" the direct cause of a great many of the early settlers' financial ruin, but Mr. Cox resisted their pernicious influence and saved his hard-earned property, while he saw many of his neighbors engulfed in the financial maelstorm. The country was slow in recovering from this disaster, but the wonderful natural resources of the broad prairies gradually repaired the disaster.

In the fall of 1846, Mr. C., my father, Elias Brown, and Peter Polley, sons-in-law, and Jos. Cox, a married son, determined to emigrate to Oregon the following year. (Mr. Pooley and Jos. Cox then resided in Missouri). Mr. C. sold his property and in the spring started with ox-teams for the then almost unknown and distant Oregon, whose shores were laved by the mighty Pacific. It was then a six-months' trip- [?] traveling sandy plains, the fatigue augmented by the almost tropical heat of the sun, while the alkali dust rose in clouds creating thirst, parching the skin and cracking the lips until they would bleed - rugged mountains were to be surmounted, dangerous streams to be crossed before the journey was ended. The trip in those days was not like it is now, a holiday excursion, but beset with unknown dangers, both through the topography of the country, the elements and the hostile, wily Indian does - implacable, unrelenting and treacherous. It took men of nerve to attempt the trip; they took their lives in their hands; their destiny, Oregon; and the accomplishment exceedingly uncertain. Mr. C. had made up his mind to go to Oregon,

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and when that was once settled, no common event could deter him. But the attempt to do so was made by the men who purchased his property by throwing obstacles in his way in compelling him to take part payment in goods and refusing to purchase his store. But they did not know the man; he simply took the goods, purchased wagons in Chicago, oxen of his old neighbors, 4 loaded up and on the day he had designated started the teams, leaving them discomfited and astonished at the energy displayed on the occasion. With these same goods he established the first store in Salem, Oregon, and south of Champoege, during the following fall.

In due time the train arrived at the rendezvous near St. Joseph, Missouri, where the final preparations were made for the great undertaking, and with his usual punctuality, started on the day appointed, traveling steadily, amid toil and hardships, until the journey was completed. I will here mention one role that was inevitably carried out while on the plains, and that was to camp on the opposite side of the stream, if towards night, as a stream is liable to become swollen and impassable during the night, thereby losing valuable time. It became evident that the teams would not be able to haul all of the wagons through the Cascade mountains, and Mr. C. directed that the wagons that contained the goods should be parked at Summit Prairie, and those containing the families should proceed while he went ahead on horseback to obtain pack animals to pack out the goods. We were sixteen days in the mountains, consequently, when in the valley a short distance, we met a large train of Indian ponies accompanied by Indians and some whites, on their way to bring in the merchandise left behind.

Oregon City was then the capital of the Provisional Government of Oregon and the emporium of the western slope of this continent - Salem, only an educational mission, although the town had been laid out - Portland, unknown, still in the womb of time. Mr. C. determined to establish himself in Salem, and within a week after his arrival was selling goods to the people; goods hauled from Illinois, over 3,000 miles distance, and taking for pay wheat, the only currency, at \$1.00 per bushel.

Within a few days, after becoming settled, he went to Oregon City to purchase the necessary groceries, such as then could be procured, Sandwich Island sugar in mats of 50 to 100 lbs. each and black as maple sugar, while the molasses would ooze out through the matting, salt in similiar mats, fit only for stock, and in lumps as large as walnuts. When Mr. C. called upon Dr. McLaughlin and informed that good old gentleman that he wished to purchase groceries for his store in Salem, the doctor asked him where he had obtained his present stock and being informed that he had hauled them across the plains, the doctor held up his hands and exclaimed, in his brisk manner, "Well I believe you Yankees could drive an ox-team over Mt. Hood!" Mr. Cox replied, "That if it had been necessary to do so, in reaching the Willamette valley, he would have attempted it." Dr. McLaughlin then replied, "Mr. Cox, you can have anything you wish." Thus commenced an acquaintance that lasted for several years, and, afterwards, when the Doctor was being persecuted by the Hudson's Bay Company - whom he had so faithfully served and given the best years of his life - and maligned and swindled by those whom he had proved an unselfish friend in time of need, he had a firm defender in Thomas Cox, a man who had never received anything at his hands aside from business courtesies, who always paid for all articles purchased, but could appreciate worth, and dared to say that a good man was being wronged, although at the time to do so was unpopular with a large class.

In the fall of 1847, the massacre of Dr. Marcus Whitman and family occurred, and the Cayuse war vigorously prosecuted, but there was a great scarcity of powder, lead and gun caps, of which Mr. Cox had a considerable quantity; this he freely donated to the volunteers, making no charge to the infant Territory in its struggle for existence.

During the winter of 1847, and the next spring, he erected a two-story, frame building on the corner of Commercial and Ferry streets, for a dwelling house and store. He, also,

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this winter, purchased a land claim of Mr. Walter Helm, and employed Mr. Peter Pulley to move on the same and make improvements, plowing, fencing, etc.

In 1848, gold was discovered in California, and, as a consequence, everything arose to fabulous prices, and the country was nearly depleted of its male population, and among those who was seized with the gold fever, was William Cox, * who went to the mines and was quite successful, and on his return home in 1849, through San Francisco, purchased a large stock of goods at quite reasonable prices, as the market at that time was quite overstocked. He, also, assumed entire control of the mercantile business in conjunction with Mr. Turner Crump. Mr. Thos. Cox now spent most of his time upon his farm and set energetically to work improving the same, but one of his first acts was to set out an orchard of apples and peaches from his own nursery, as he had brought the seeds with him to this country. He propagated and successfully cultivated what is now known as "Cox's Golden Cling." the finest yellow peach upon this coast. This orchard proved to be very remunerative, as apples readily sold at \$6.00 and peaches at \$10.00 to \$12.00 per bushel.

In 1851, he became connected with Joseph Watt, Wm. H. Rector, John Monto, Joseph G. Wilson, John D. Boon, and others, in erecting the Willamette Woolen Mills, the pioneer establishment of the coast, and was appointed to superintend the erection of the dam across Mill creek in North Salem, and so well was it performed, that it successfully, resisted the floods over twenty years. In 1860, he sold his shares to Hon. Joseph

* William Cox was the youngest son of Thomas Cox and crossed the plains with his father in 1847.

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Smith. In the spring, he removed to Salem, and resided with Hon. P. F. Harding, his son-in-law, with whom he resided the remainder of his life. During the summer, he met with an accident, caused by his horse backing off of the Pudding river bridge, in which the buggy

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and horse fell fifteen feet, entirely destroying the buggy, but in the fall Mr. Cox fell to one side, thus escaping instant death, although greatly jarred, and, undoubtedly, never fully recovered from the shock.

Mr. Cox died in Salem, October 3, 1862, lacking only sixteen days of being seventy-two years of age. In physical development, he was small, and probably, never weighed over 150 pounds, but wiry and energetic, possessing good, preceptive faculties, and successful in all business enterprises. He was a man of considerable ingenuity and could make most anything he wished. Strictly honest in all his dealings, he exacted the same from others. He possessed very rare musical talent, and the writer has listened on many a winter's evening to the tones of the violin in his hands, an accomplishment that he had acquired in his younger days. Although his educational opportunities had been limited, he had acquired considerable information as he was a great reader. Always a frontiersman, he was of that class, who with rifle on the shoulder and axe in hand, was capable of defending himself and family, at the same time making a home in a new country and establish civilization - a fit representative of an Oregon pioneer. He belonged to a class that is rapidly disappearing. They have fulfilled their mission and are being gathered from the earth. [Thomas Cox?]

Penned in ink on the back of first page of manuscript.

From Salem Directory for 1871.

By J. Henry Brown

"In the summer of 1848, Thomas Cox, an immigrant of 1847, who came by the Barlow route, brought in a small stock of drygoods, and engaged in merchandizing the first in Salem, Oregon during the winter of (1847-8). He selected the northeast corner of Commercial and Ferry streets in Salem and built a two story house upon it, which was used by him as a store and a dwelling during the time of his residence in Salem. His was the first building put up in Salem after the town was surveyed. Afterward a two story house

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built by Thomas Powell, blacksmith, about one block west from Commercial street was removed and placed in the rear of the one built by Thomas Cox. These two were united and formed the Union Hotel which was burned with nearly all the buildings in that block. A few years since J. B. McClane had goods brought from Cal. gold mines in May 1849, goods from San Francisco costing about \$2,500 which in a few months sold for \$6000 cash in hand still leaving a considerable portion of them on hand. This was the second stock of goods opened in Salem.

The third stock (1849) David Carter brought from California. He went for a second stock, vessel ran on a sand spit, was detained some weeks; he heard his family was sick, he went insane and after some time hung himself. The fourth stock was bought by Philaster Lee 1850."